

# WHAT PART OF "NO" WILL THEY UNDERSTAND?

by Janine Brodie

On October 26, 1992, for only the third time in our history, Canadians went to the polls to vote in a national referendum. Unlike the previous two experiences, this time Canadians were not offered a straightforward choice on a single issue. Instead, they were asked to endorse a complex and incomplete constitutional package whose details were decided only two months earlier and, as we all know, Canadians responded with a resounding "no!"

The vote scuttled the Charlottetown Accord, but it is less clear what this said or foreshadowed about

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Canadian politics. Brian Mulroney spelled out his interpretation during the referendum campaign. "If the vote is No," he said, "it's all over. It's No to the aboriginals. It's No to Senate reform. It's No to the 31 gains for Quebec and the gains for the other provinces. It's No to everything."

## WISHFUL THINKING

The media, political pundits, and public alike, however, seem to be in a collective state of denial about the implications of the vote or Mulroney's statement. There is a growing consensus that the "no" vote provides an opportunity to put the constitution on the back burner and get on with "politics as usual," especially the pressing task of reviving the economy. More incredibly, Michael Bliss argued that the defeat of the Charlottetown Ac-

cord represented a vote for the constitutional status quo—a legitimization of the deal that Trudeau struck in 1981-1982 without the consent of Quebec.

All of this, it strikes me, is so much wishful thinking. There was no single meaning of the "no" vote. If anything, it demonstrated with stark clarity the multiple, deep, and contradictory visions that now compete on the constitutional terrain. These multiple meanings suggest that there is little common ground left in Canada on which to construct a new national consensus and, the referendum process itself may have only served to congeal and widen the existing gulfs. Contrary to the wilfully myopic predictions, "politics as usual" in Canada's foreseeable future will be an ongoing, if not intensified, politics of fragmentation and crisis mismanagement.

## THE CATCH-UP GAME

Perhaps, this is no more obvious than with the case of Quebec. Some pundits took comfort in the fact that Quebec and the rest of Canada finally seemed to be in agreement in their disagreement with the constitutional package, but the reasons why Quebec and the rest of Canada rejected the Accord were entirely different. On one side, "no" meant that Quebec got too much and, on the other, "no" meant that it got too little.

The Charlottetown Accord represented a moment on a steadily escalating climb for autonomy in Quebec. For the past 30 years, English Canada has been caught in a game of "catch up" with Quebec nationalism—a game that it is losing. Each time the rest of Canada is prepared to respond to Quebec's aspirations, it has already moved an-

other step up the ladder. It has become increasingly apparent that the accommodation of Quebec within Confederation will ultimately depend on a radical rethinking of Canadian federalism that would allow for an asymmetric political un-

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ion. The idea of such a "special status" for Quebec, however, has and will continue to be resisted by both the public and other provincial governments. The Charlottetown Accord, like the Meech Lake Accord before it, failed to bridge this fundamental impasse, but unless some kind of bridge is constructed and soon, it is hard to disagree with PQ leader Parizeau that the referendum represented just a brief "detour" on the road to independence.

## ON THE BACK BURNER

The same might be said about the demands of the aboriginal peoples for self-government. After decades of frustration, aboriginal issues edged to the top of the constitutional agenda and native leaders were invited to the bargaining table. The Canada Round raised the expectations of the aboriginal peoples that the days of colonialism and constitutional limbo had finally passed. When the "no" votes collided on October 26, however, these expectations were dashed. The native leaders were openly bitter and cynical

about the constitutional reform process. These justifiable sentiments were only further reinforced when Justice Minister Campbell informed the native leadership the next day that the "no" vote meant that she did not have the mandate to negotiate fundamental changes in the status quo. So what does "politics as usual" mean here? The issue has been relegated to the back burner where, if left unattended, it will most certainly simmer and then explode.

It is perhaps less obvious, but equally important, to recognize that the Canada Round and its aftermath also hardened divisions within the aboriginal community itself. The authority of the frontline organizations has been eroded and deep divisions have grown between treaty and non-treaty Indians, feminists and non-feminists, as well as between traditionalists and, for lack of a better term, modernists, and somehow these divisions have been taken to mean that it is acceptable that the aboriginal constitutional agenda was thwarted. This, of course, is the most offensive form of chauvinism. It reduces the diversity of the aboriginal peoples to some amorphous "other" that is expected to speak in a single voice—a condition that "we" as Canadians do not apply to ourselves. Perhaps even more offensive is the idea that these issues will lay dormant until

"we" elect to return to the table. The "no" vote denied this community its first steps on the road to self-determination. Whether this happened by accident or intention, the consequences remain the same.

#### YES AND NO

I voted "yes" on October 26, not because I thought that it would end our constitutional crisis but, instead, because it established some common ground. I also voted "yes" because of what was not there—the federal government's neo-liberal economic agenda that appeared in

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the initial federal proposals. The economic union proposals were flatly rejected during the public round and sidetracked in the political accords attached to the final document, but this repudiation seems to be the part of "no" that the federal government chose not to understand. Only days after the referendum defeat, it announced plans to drastically reduce the federal government and released its *Prosperity Agenda*, which contains precisely the same

neo-liberal prescriptions it tried to constitutionalize in the Canada Round. It may be that the next constitutional round — and there will be a next one — will be more democratized. In the meantime, however, the "no" vote has given the federal Conservatives a green light to try to realize as much of their economic agenda as they can before Canadians once again go to the polls.

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